DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 092 589 TM 003 701

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TITLE Evaluation of a Public Tax-Supported Alternative School.
PUB DATE [Apr 74]
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Chicago, Illinois, April, 1974)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.75 HC-$1.50 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS Achievement Gains; Administrator Attitudes; *Alternative Schools; *Evaluation Methods; Parent Attitudes; Public Schools; Student Attitudes; Teacher Attitudes

ABSTRACT

The evaluation of a public tax-supported alternative school is described. The emphasis is upon the problems involved in the evaluation of this kind of school and suggested methods of overcoming them. A post-pre design combined with control groups is described, and the pros and cons of involvement and detachment on the part of the evaluators is considered. The problems associated with reactivity of the program staff and students to the evaluators are discussed. The main findings and results are presented. (Author)

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ABSTRACT

Evaluation of a Public Tax-Supported Alternative School[1]

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The paper describes the evaluation of a public tax-supported alternative school. The emphasis is upon the problems involved in the evaluation of this kind of school and suggested methods of overcoming them. A post-pre design combined with control groups is described, and the pros and cons of involvement and detachment on the part of the evaluators is considered. The problems associated with reactivity of the program staff and students to the evaluators are discussed. The main findings and results are presented.

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# Evaluation of a Public Tax-Supported Alternative School[1]

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The main emphasis in this paper is upon the methods, problems, and issues involved in an evaluation program designed to provide information to assist a school board in determining the fate of a publicly supported alternative (free) school program designed for 8th, 9th, and 10th graders. This was a real evaluation, not a theoretical exercise. The opportunity to evaluate a tax-supported alternative (free) school was considered by the authors too valuable an opportunity to pass up notwithstanding the fact that the school board placed a number of limiting and ofttimes irksome constraints upon the exercise. Alternative schools abound in the USA and doubtless some are evaluated; however, very very few (if any) tax-supported schools of this type have undergone a full scale evaluation. Thus, constraints and difficulties notwithstanding the opportunity were extremely inviting.

The major parameters set before the evaluators by the school board were: (1) The need for academic data; (2) The need for attitude data from students, parents, and school personnel; (3) The need for a control group; and (4) The requirement that the study be finished in 10 months, bridging two school years.

The problems generated by these restrictions were compounded by the self-selected nature of the student body of the free school. The staff of the school tended to be very cooperative; however, this cooperation led to problems of reactivity and the problem of evaluating a program in flux.

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Theoretical Framework

The evaluation was based upon a threefold structure: (1) Description of the program; (2) Description of the students; (3) Comparison of the students with the most comparable control group.

The evaluation was by necessity a quasi-experimental design with all statistics chosen to illustrate most clearly the characteristics of students or direction of change taken by a particular group. The problems inherent in evaluating a relatively new and ongoing program (ongoing at least as far as the staff was concerned) were such that the whole exercise was necessarily a combination of the formative and summative aspects of evaluation. The dictates of the school board placed the emphasis upon the summative procedures.

The need to complete the evaluation over a ten (10) month period spanning two (2) school years (March-December) dictated the overall design selected. Ideally, a matched sample control group might have been selected, though necessarily they would be different in that such a sample would in fact be attending regular schools and not the alternative school. The problem of time, so often forgotten in a theoretical exercise and so often crucial in a real study, forced the selection of a comparison group drawn from a regular school in the same area from which a large number of those attending the alternative school came. Additional data from a comparison group were gathered from a school judged to be most similar to the type of school from which the free school students came. Students in this situation were given one part of the Stanford Achievement Test and the attitude test. This was done to satisfy a time limit for data gathering imposed by officials in the control school. File data provided the ability measures.

The second part of the design utilized a post-pre design wherein students newly come to the alternative school in the fall (September) were evaluated/measured/observed and compared with students who the previous summer (June) had been in the program for a year. While not ideal, this procedure was again dictated by the demands of time but nevertheless did permit some assessment of "growth" or "change" which could be attributed to the alternative school program. Necessarily such a procedure assumes comparability of the two alternative school groups and depended upon there being no change in the admission procedures, etc., of the school. This criteria was, as far as can be assessed, met.

Methods

At the start of the evaluation, a decision had to be made regarding the overall evaluation method that was to be used: Were the evaluators to be detached? Were they to be involved participant observers? In this instance, the evaluators concluded that little evaluation could in fact take place unless the evaluators were accepted by students and staff as a general part of the scenery and structure of the school. In short, detachment, though a laudible ideal, did not seem to be a real possibility. At the same time there seemed little point in pretending that an evaluator was not in the last resort a person making judgments about staff, students, and the whole school. In these circumstances, it seemed unlikely that the evaluators could be totally accepted. Familiarity and ordinariness could and was accomplished, however, by spending hundreds of hours in the school (over forty (40) visits were made by the evaluators in less than two school

terms) such that the presence of evaluators talking, looking, and perhaps testing, became just a part of the general scene.

Thus the description of the program was not based only upon the stated objectives of the group, but was basically an observation of the group in action. Attendance data was gathered from file records kept by the personnel and this form of data was supplemented by direct observation of students in the building and in the classrooms. The alternative school group was tested with the Stanford Achievement Test, the Brown Holtzman Survey of Study Habits and Attitudes, and the Short Form Academic Aptitude Test. A test designed to measure attitude toward their specific school was constructed and administered. Further evaluation was based upon the grades assigned to the students by the teachers, even though this student evaluation was relatively free form. Records from permanent files were useful in evaluating projected achievement scores from early school attendance. Discussion with students was systematically pursued and observations of work habits were gathered. The expectations of the staff were analyzed in comparison with what could be expected knowing the characteristics of the students.

Data relating to opinions of the members of the community and of other school officials were contrasted with objective evidence available. Incidental or non-relative data were gathered and were contrasted with what was expected by other school administrators.

The intent in the study was that the data gathered be direct and primary wherever possible, and this aim was accomplished. Intelligence and achievement tests were administered even though other tests may have been available in the file. This was done because the responses of the students

to the tests were in themselves data, and because more complete data was thus available.

Data from the control group (students in a regular junior high school) was in part gathered by the evaluators (Stanford Achievement Test, attitude test, interviews regarding part-time jobs, and attitudes) and in part obtained from the students' permanent record files (intelligence test scores, achievement tests).

## Results

Characteristics of the Students. The student body was predominantly male, almost in the ratio of 2/1. There was a slight 6 point difference in favor of the females in the I.Q. of the students who were in the program for at least the year. In this alternative school, the students approximate the conventional definition of normal intelligence with a combined across groups intelligence of approximately 90. The variances were as expected, approximately 15 I.Q. points. Though the alternative school group had a low normal I.Q., their reported self perception was that of dull. This perception may have been reinforced by the control groups, mean I.Q. of 110 again with a variance of 15. Thus in the context of the school district the alternative school group should not be contrasted with a normal population with a mean of 100, but with a group having above average intelligence. Teachers in the regular schools may perceive an I.Q. of 90 as dull when compared to the control group figure of 110.

About two-thirds of the students in the alternative school were from single-parent homes contrasted with one-third from such homes in the control group.

The alternative school students tend to like their school, compared to those in the control group who were more negative. This was found both in interview data and in a short attitude-to-school scale.

Achievement. Both the finishing class and the entering class in the alternative school have a level of academic achievement that can be predicted from their ability scores. The special treatment of the alternative school does not break this pervasive correlation. Specifically, the alternative school students have reading ability at the 6th grade level rather than at the normal age/grade 9/10 level. The control group had reading ability at the 10th grade level. In math computation the alternative school students were three years behind grade level while the control students were two years behind grade level. In the math application area, the alternative school students were two years behind grade level while the control school was about three months behind grade level.

In no case was there a noticeable improvement in the alternative school students in academic achievement when entering students were compared with finishing students. It was not possible to compare the growth of alternative school students with similar students in regular schools because there seemed no practical way of finding such a group.

Attitude Change. Student attitude was assessed through interviews and with a standardized school attitude survey: The Brown Holtzman Survey of Study Habits and Attitudes. This was supplemented with a specially constructed attitude-to-school scale. Additional hard data relating to attitude change was gathered by looking at attendance figures.

On the Brown Holtzman there was more than one standard deviation improvement in attitude; the alternative school students moved from almost three

standard deviations below the national mean on total attitude to school to slightly less than one standard deviation below the mean in a period of less than a year. In general, those students who go through one year in the alternative program finish the year with an attitude to their school almost at the same level that the control students have to their school. The control students approximate the national average. This is a remarkable improvement and is confirmed by every piece of data, including interviews with alternative school teachers, parents, and the students themselves. If the goal of the alternative program was to be attitude change only, then that goal was surely met.

Parents. The interview and survey data from the parents and guardians of the alternative school students indicated that they were very satisfied with the school. This satisfaction was not so much in terms of what the school was doing academically, rather was a response to the fact that someone was trying to help their children. Parents seemed united on the view that the school was doing a better job than the regular school for their children. There were, of course, a few caveats but they were far outweighed by those satisfied. This good parental attitude to the school may have been in part due to the fact that parents see the school as a last chance for their children, one that otherwise would not be provided. The parents of graduates from the school were the most pleased with the operation. This could have been properly influenced by the finding that 70 per cent of the graduates were either attending school (52 per cent) beyond the alternative school or at work (17 per cent). There was a very high percentage of return of the survey forms sent to parents and almost two-thirds of the forms contained a page or

more of additional comment beyond the questions asked directly. This certainly reflects a high level of parental interest in the program.

Teacher - School Administrator Interviews and Survey. The regular school teachers at the junior high and high school levels were far less enthusiastic about the alternative school operation than were the parents of alternative school students. Two separate surveys indicated that a large number of the teachers thought that the financial investment in the alternative school would be better used reducing class loads in the regular schools. There was some feeling that the school was doing more harm than good. The most solid finding from the teacher surveys was that regular teachers know little about the school and the more they knew, the less they liked it(!)

Administrators were more favorably disposed toward the school but seemed jealous of its financial support. Extensive interviews most strongly suggested that some of the administrators thought that a major use for the alternative school was as a place where problem students could be sent or placed. This was a mismatch with the goals that the personnel at the alternative school had adopted, for they thought of themselves as working with students not disturbed or problems but more alienated from the world than anything else.

The most supportive professional group were the regular school counselors who also had the greatest contact with those students showing potential need of the alternative school's services. All district personnel, with the exception of those directly associated with the alternative school, appeared notably ignorant about the alternative program.

Discussion

The school board gave the evaluators four charges which will be used as framework for brief discussion.

(1) The Need for Academic Data

Testing in an alternative school was not as difficult as we had first supposed it might be, because the students seemed motivated to cooperate. The high compliance with testing regimentation is perhaps evidence of the program's success in changing student attitude toward some common school activities.

Academic data from student files was useful in that those students who had permanent record files showed similar scores in our own testing program. This provides some check on the validity of the evaluators' procedures.

Evaluators could not depend upon the existence of good file data because of the transient nature of the population which leaves far too many data holes.

(2) Attitudinal Data Relating to the Students, Parents and School Personnel was Requested

The evaluators were surprised at the power of a conventional test in picking up attitudinal change. The success of the instrument may be in part due to the fact that we were working with very low/poor attitudes, i.e., students who were not topping out on the test. The cooperation of parents was impressive. We think that the parents of alternative school children are a valuable source of information which is often untapped. Evaluators need not assume that parents of such exceptional students are non-responsive.

(3) Need for a Control Group

We could not and did not provide for a conventional control group. We did provide a comparison group in a normal school. There was no way to randomly assign students to treatments: instead, post-pre alternative groups were constructed and these were compared with each other and with students in a normal school setting. Adequate control groups still need to be built to make more definitive statements about the effectiveness of alternative programs.

(4) The Study was Finished in Ten Months

This would have been difficult if one of the investigators had not made it a sabbatical project; to say the least there is a tendency to underestimate the amount of time each step in evaluation takes. The alternative school setting seems to require that in the early stages evaluators proceed very slowly to allow students and staff to become accustomed to them.

In addition to the findings reported here, certain observations were made by the investigators that may be instructive to others attempting such an operation.

(a) The staff of the alternative school tended to underrate the ability and willingness of the students at the alternative school to take tests, and it was the staff more than the students who had to be sold on this phase of the evaluation.

(b) The staff reacted to our presence by starting a more or less systematic look at their own product. They attempted to institute changes in entrance requirements that would have made the pre-test group not exactly comparable to the post-test group.

(c) The local professional teachers' organization instituted an evaluation of its own, with attendant confusion.

(d) There are no available control groups and the constructed comparison groups were not as motivated as the alternative school students. Teachers and administrators in the comparison schools were reluctant to give up time for evaluation.

(e) All phases of the evaluation took three times as long as anticipated.

(f) Many teachers and parents were very appreciative of the opportunity to be included in an evaluation. This indicates that there is strong interest in the public in the evaluation process.

## References

Gaite, A. J. H. and Rankin, Richard J. "The Opportunity Center: The Evaluation of a Public Alternative School." December 1973, unpublished.